

Breaking the law: Patrick Pearse, cultural revival, and the site of sovereignty

Eugene McNulty*

St Patrick's College, Dublin

This paper focuses on the intersections between Patrick Pearse's revolutionary career as leader of the Easter Rising and his interests in the law and theatre. The paper opens with a discussion of the context of cultural revival and the emergent anti-colonial movements that so radically shaped Irish history in the early decades of the 20th century – a key suggestion here is that the idea of the law shadows much of this period's discourse. It is in this context that Pearse's political pamphlets are unpacked to reveal the manner in which he theorizes the problematic linkages between empire, sovereign power, and the law. The paper then moves to examine Pearse's use of the theatre as a space for exploring the intimate connections between conceptions of the law and national identity. In all of this, Pearse's work is seen as much more experimental, and perhaps even proto-modernist, than is often suggested within a critical discourse that focuses on the Romantic-nationalist elements of his revolutionary activities.

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Writing from Trieste in 1907, James Joyce, in a newspaper piece entitled “Ireland at the Bar”, sought to allegorize Ireland's troubled status – as a non-speaking actor on the stage of nations – by recourse to a narrative of legal inequality:

Several years ago a sensational trial was held in Ireland. In a lonely place [...] a murder was committed. Four or five townsmen [...] were arrested. The oldest of them, the seventy year old Myles Joyce, was the prime suspect. Public opinion at the time thought him innocent and today considers him a martyr. Neither the old man nor the others accused knew English. [...] The questioning, conducted through the interpreter, was at times comic and at times tragic. On one side was the excessively ceremonious interpreter, on the other the patriarch of a miserable tribe unused to civilised customs, who seemed stupefied by all the judicial ceremony. (197)

Much like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, the old man is faced by a process of law that he cannot comprehend, one he cannot access in any meaningful way. Myles Joyce cannot “read” or make visible the law that has him in its grip, he cannot speak to it. Likewise, Joyce presents the law as having no proper access to, or interest in, him as a subject in the world. It is a narrative that resonates with Gayatri Spivak's assertion that colonial law was one of those processes whose effect was to eradicate spaces of power within which the colonial subject could articulate his or her proper subjectivity. Along with the production of ideological and scientific systems of knowledge, the “institution of the law” was one more discursive space wherein “great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary” (Spivak 75). For

*Email: eugene.mculty@spd.dcu.ie

his namesake James, Myles Joyce becomes symbolic of Ireland as it stands subject to a law that misreads it, as it stands exposed to a system that speaks “differently”: “The figure of this dumbfounded old man, a remnant of a civilisation not ours, deaf and dumb before his judge, is a symbol of the Irish nation at the bar of public opinion” (198). The issue of language in a sense locates just one point in a matrix of deep-rooted communicative failures. For Joyce, these failures are needled through the colonial project as a whole and result in the absence of a law that can properly read the subjects within its purview.

The timing of Joyce’s journalistic intervention is interesting; its context is a period in Irish cultural history marked by a concerted renegotiation of the imaginative territory informing conceptions of Irish identity politics. Against the backdrop of a politics in slow-burning crisis, this period of cultural revival is marked by an interrogation – expressed through literary and dramatic forms – of the network of power relations that defined Irish society, its internal delineations, and its external relationship with Great Britain (enshrined legislatively in the Act of Union). In what follows, I want to argue that a key concern for many revivalist writers was the colonial underpinnings of the institution of the law in Ireland. Narratives about the law, justice, prisons, the police, abound in Irish writing from this early part of the 20th century. Most famously, earlier in the same year as Joyce published his piece in Italy, J.M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* premiered at the Abbey Theatre. The ensuing “riots”, and subsequent presence of the police in the theatre to subdue an animated and offended audience, ironically mirrored the action on stage of a play concerned with the reach of the law and with the distrust of “English law” amongst the west’s Irish-speaking communities. Just a few months earlier (October 1906), the Abbey had also been the venue for the first production of Lady Gregory’s play *The Gaol Gate*. In this piece, two women keep a vigil outside the gate of Galway Gaol awaiting the release of their husband/son Denis, who they are convinced has been wrongly detained. Rather than see him released, however, the prison’s Gatekeeper informs them that Denis has already been executed and they are too late in their mission to plead his case. The play ends with the women taking solace in the fact that Denis had chosen death rather than turning informant to the authorities.

Two of the men who would go on to play key roles in the nationalist rebellion of Easter 1916, Thomas MacDonagh and James Connolly, would each pick up on this theme of the law as a suspect agent of power in plays written during this period. MacDonagh’s *When the Dawn Is Come* (1908) recounts a story of Irish rebellion in some unspecified period of history; and at its heart we find a group of proto-nationalist leaders who are largely suspicious of the law, an entity that they read as a possible obscurer of truth. As one rebel puts it: “Ere we proceed, I think it were well to ask if this cry of ‘the law’ lead us aright or amiss. We are soldiers, aye, and Councillors, for the war, unsuited to the wordy ways of the law” (67). While another comes to the revolutionary conclusion that “supreme command in battle is the law, suspending other law” (67), an idea that speaks strongly to the later event in which MacDonagh will play such a leading role. We can detect an even more direct relationship between the cultural deconstruction of law in Ireland and the philosophy of rebellion in James Connolly’s play *Under Which Flag?* (1916), written and performed just weeks before the real-life drama of the Easter Rising. Connolly here returns to ground familiar from Gregory’s *Gaol Gate*, to the dangers of informants and covert agents of the law, with one character clearly expressing the nationalist distrust of the police:

Mary: Indeed, I heard a man say that the polis are worse than the sogers [soldiers]. He said that if the sogers fight for England, the polis man spies for England. [...] The polis man spends his whole life as a spy and a traitor upon his own people, drinks with

them, goes to the chapel with them, and sits down in their houses, and all the time busy contriving how he can send them to the prison or the gallows. (114)

Under Which Flag? was first performed in Liberty Hall, the main base for the Easter Rising in Dublin, just one month before the rebellion, and is clearly a warning to its audience to be on their guard against informers, covert agents, and “loose-talk”. But it is also a thorough-going critique of the jurisprudence of colonialism and its power-invested modalities within an oppressed society. The clear suggestion is that Irish people should not only reject these legal agents but also the entire edifice of the law that they embody.

From the literary iconoclast James Joyce, through the dominant revivalist figures of the early Abbey Theatre, to the militant rebels of the Easter Rising, then, we can trace a shared concern for the law as a problematic agent of power in Ireland. This varied but connected interest in the law as a synecdoche for the issues of power and sovereignty, I want to argue, provides an important map of the imaginative territory on which Ireland engaged with its search for postcoloniality. It is here that Patrick Pearse becomes a particularly key figure, for it is Pearse who, more than anyone else perhaps, engaged with the full range of this web of cultural and political praxis. Mostly remembered as the iconic figure of the Easter Rising, Pearse was also a playwright, poet, and principal of his own school. As Seamus Deane puts it, Pearse is this period’s “most famous minor writer and its major revolutionary figure” (63); one could argue, indeed, that it is the tensions between these designations that leads Declan Kiberd to note that it can seem “almost heretical to link Pearse to James Joyce” (65). Yet both men were certainly interested in the transformatory possibilities offered by the imaginative re-ordering of the world. Moreover, many years before the turn to militarism, Pearse too had been much concerned with the problems of communication and the law. In addition to his persona of schoolmaster turned soldier, Patrick Pearse also held a law degree, and it was this intimate knowledge of judicial procedure that generated his interest in the law as an instrument of colonial policy.

Coincidentally, around the same period when Joyce was writing in Trieste, Pearse took on what appears to have been his only case as a barrister in court – and it is a case that echoes Myles Joyce’s experience of communicative alienation. The case of R.V. MacBride (or MacGhiolla Bhrighde) concerned the use of Gaelic names on carts, and Pearse took the case on behalf of the Gaelic League. As Arthur Cleary, who was present in court, observed:

It was in some ways a strong case. The events happened in a thoroughly Irish part of Tirconail where Irish was the national language of everyone, and it might, therefore, seem reasonable that a native Irish speaker was justified in describing himself in that language on his cart. But this would not have accorded with the persecution of the Irish language, which was then, and is still largely, pursued. Consequently an R.I.C. constable had prosecuted him and there had been a conviction. Against this the proceedings in the King’s Bench were, in effect, an appeal. (113–14)

Joyce’s metaphorical concern for a law incapable of reading its subjects is transformed into the literal material of this case. The law here refuses the signification of identity inscribed in Irish letters on the man’s cart, insisting instead on a transformation of the terms through which identity is expressed and thus made knowable to it. The presiding judge, indeed, after arguing “in favour of Irish for a bit – a way of his when he was going to decide against you”, eventually proposed “some complications which involved the conception of an Irish-speaking police constable who knew no English” (Cleary 115) – a rather problematic sidestepping of the relationship that was actually at stake in the case. In its summing up the court confirmed that “Letters meant English Letters” (Cleary 115). Both the case of Myles Joyce

and Pearse's experience of "English" law in Ireland may be read as demonstrating the problem of what Jean-François Lyotard has termed the *différend*, namely (as Spivak parses it), "the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another" (96). Both cases, that is, reveal a discursive friction or disconnect between the hegemonic ambitions of British jurisprudence in Ireland and the actual bodies that it attempts to regulate and make knowable to itself.

In this regard, although R.V. MacBride was to be Pearse's only real foray into the courts acting as a barrister, there is a clear sense in which the concept and performance of colonial law in Ireland sits at the heart of his writings in the years leading up to the 1916 rebellion. I want to argue, furthermore, that the law is a vital concept linking Pearse's creative and political writings – writings that theorize his shift to military action. In particular, in what follows this essay explores the ways in which Pearse's work in the run-up to the Easter Rising became increasingly obsessed with the function of sovereignty and its role as the origin of the law, with the problem of empire and the law, and with the nation and "the people" as a counter locus of legal prerogative. The final statement of this thinking comes, of course, with the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, which Pearse helped draft with James Connolly and read out at the start of the Easter Rising; but my focus here is on the ways in which Pearse rehearsed and theorized much of this thinking in his creative and journalistic output before the Easter rebellion. This is work that attempts to unpack the proper site of the law and the possibility of transformation and translation – a process that Pearse appears to propose as the task of culture before it can be the job of politics. In this regard, I want to suggest, Pearse's writing and thinking was much more engaged with modernity than is often presented as the case. Just as Joyce's concern for imaginative transformation led to the most thoroughgoing of all literary modernisms, then perhaps in his attempts to re-conceptualize sovereignty and the law we may locate the source of what Máire Ní Fhlathúin describes as the "anti-colonial modernism of Patrick Pearse".

Proclaiming the Republic: Patrick Pearse and the performance of sovereignty

In an essay concerned with the entry into history of the American Declaration of Independence, and the people on whose behalf it spoke, Jacques Derrida unpacks what he sees as the enabling but ambivalent chronotope occupied by this radical political birth. Meditating on the Declaration as a special form of "event", he begins by examining the idea of the people as a formation that can be spoken *of*, and the origin of this power to speak *for* them:

The "we" of the Declaration speaks "in the name of the people". But these people do not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not as *such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signifier, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. ("Declarations" 49)

Derrida's probings reveal the kernel of a key issue of modernity: the origin and authorization of sovereign power, the processes of its capturing, and the possibility of its translation to a new site of emanation. Acts of national foundation, at least as they occur in the purview of modernity, thus occupy a particular kind of performative space. By announcing the people's existence, as independent and sovereign subjects in history, the Declaration articulates the conditions whereby this can *become* the case. Tracing this process, however, opens up further rather than resolves the complexity involved in the translation of the site of sovereign power:

The question remains: How is a state made or founded, how does a state make or found itself? And independence? And the autonomy of one that both gives itself and signs its own law? Who signs all of these authorisations to sign? (“Declarations” 53)

At stake here is the ability to make the law a subject in history, to grasp its origin in ways that make possible its re-articulation in terms other than those offered by hegemonic power. Clearly this dialectic holds a particular relevance for the processes – ideological, political, cultural – that drive forward anti-colonial movements. In the terms suggested by Derrida, the search for postcoloniality essentially becomes the search for the terms in which the law can be simultaneously rejected and re-authored.

An understanding of exactly this process is evidenced in the self-reflexivity that punctuates the Proclamation of the Irish Republic – a document that, coming in the wake of other such documents, must now always and already be a meta-text. The Proclamation begins with its initial statement of republican first principles: “We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible” (“Proclamation” 733). There is a particular kind of anterior move at work here – the text proclaims a pre-existing, and as we’ll see “natural”, authority to author the law, and continues: “Standing on that fundamental right, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State” (733). In this act of public reading, then, a process of annunciation that simultaneously sought to create the appropriate public to listen, Pearse broke the law. Not simply in the usual sense of this phrase (Pearse would indeed end up in prison, on trial, and finally shot for his part in the rebellion), but in the sense of breaking open the codification of British law in Ireland, and in so doing revealing the law as open to transformation and translation. The Proclamation in effect sought to reveal an “absence” at the centre of British colonialism in Ireland, and replace this with the presence of national authority encoded in this counter-reading of sovereignty. In effect the signatories of the Proclamation claimed the authority to sign the (new) law.

Looking back at Pearse’s political writings in the lead-up to the Easter rebellion, moreover, we find a sophisticated project to theorize the relationship between sovereignty and the law. Most obviously in a series of pamphlets entitled *Tracts for the Times*, Pearse consistently strove to create an imagined community that could see itself as an agent of change in the struggle for sovereign control. In one such pamphlet, entitled “The Sovereign People” (1916), for example, he goes to great lengths to reveal for his readers the vacuum of colonial law into which the Proclamation would later announce itself. What is at stake here is a subtle unpacking of the law’s nature and origin. The pamphlet makes explicit a link that will be more covert in the actual Proclamation, asserting that “the right to the material ownership of a nation’s soil coexists with the right to make laws for the nation and that both are inherent in the same authority, the Sovereign People” (“Sovereign People” 10); and combines this republican principle with a more clearly targeted anti-colonial discourse, making it plain that the “laws made or acts done by anybody purporting to represent the people but not really authorised by the people, either expressly or impliedly, to represent them and to act for them do not bind the people; are a usurpation, an impertinence, a nullity” (“Sovereign People” 5–6). The implications are clear – a properly constituted anti-colonialism would not only resist colonial law but seek to reveal a fundamental absence of authority at its core. Colonial law is here not so much simply wrong, rather it is empty.

Pearse’s ideas on the proper site of the law rely heavily on a distinction that he continually emphasizes between the nation and empire, entities he argues that are different qualitatively as well as quantitatively:

The nation is a natural division, as natural as the family, and as inevitable. That is one reason why a nation is holy and why an empire is not holy [...]. The nation is the family in large; an empire is a commercial corporation in large. The nation is of God; the empire is of man – if it be not of the devil. (“Sovereign People” 7)

The rights of the nation are thus transcendental and sacred, and so trump those claimed on behalf of the profane functionality of empire – an argument that has to be read in terms of its strategic deployment within an anti-colonial discourse. There is a tendency in this regard to read Pearse as an arch-conservative, one whose Romantic-nationalist rhetoric reveals a reactionary drive; and his writing does undoubtedly provide evidence for such an interpretation (see Dudley Edwards). His famous polemic on education in Ireland “The Murder Machine” (1908), for example, includes the suggestion that when it comes to religion and education “mediaevalism were a truer standard” (19), while the play *The Singer* (1915) famously concludes with an Irish rebel proclaiming advanced nationalism as a form of Christian duty:

One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world. I will take no pike, I will go into the battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall, as Christ hung naked before men on the tree! (44)

I want to argue, however, that there is a much more subversive subtext at work in Pearse’s writing than such seemingly anti-modern stances would at first suggest. His constant invocation of the sacred and the nation as transcendental may be read as an anti-realist strategy, one that is keyed into – and thus rejects – the imaginative processes informing colonial policy and its philosophical underpinnings. Rather than reactionary, Pearse’s imaginative works may be read as a form of (proto-)magical-realism, a mode of writing that by the late 20th century would be readily associated with postcoloniality. Pearse’s moves towards pseudo-mystical readings of politics (the nation, sovereignty, the law, the people) are all in a sense tied to a rejection of realism as the imaginative mode of empire and capitalism (see Ní Fhlathúin). What all his writings have in common is the delineation of a discursive counter-space, an imaginative space in which transformation is possible. The conservative images with which Pearse’s writings are drenched are thus vehicles for carrying much more radical and subversive ideas. The Irish rebel in *The Singer* may align his challenge to British hegemony with the transcendental sacrificial power of Christian history, but the subtext is really the revelation of radical change as a possibility. The performance of Irish nationalism in these sacred terms, in other words, is connected with the articulation of proper national sovereignty as residing in a space quite separate from the imperial simulacra of capitalism, power, and the law. Revolution is thus proposed as a kind of return, and does indeed draw heavily on the rhetoric of tradition, but this is in fact a largely strategic move; as Declan Kiberd has pointed out, the leaders of the Easter Rising needed to mask their modernity “for they knew that in a society undergoing rapid change, it is wise to present the very new as a restoration of the very old” (67). It is this double move that I wish to explore below in terms of Pearse’s creative work and the re-articulation of the law and sovereignty that shadows it.

Pearse, cultural revival, and the law

The sustaining argument in what follows is that Pearse’s creative work, produced in that period of his life when he was heavily committed to cultural revival in Ireland, creates an

imaginative space in which sovereignty and the law are exposed to a radical interrogation. This interrogation, moreover, continually explores the possibility of seeing the law differently, and in so doing indexes the terms on which it could be translated, reformed, and reclaimed. It is this description of a theoretical zone in which such concepts are made viable objects for narrative that locates this moment as proto-postcolonial. Pearse's pre-theorizing of political revolution, moreover, resonates with Lyotard's conception of the postmodern writer as one whose work stands outside the rules of its time; or, as he puts it: "Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (81). It is this specialized temporality that prompts Declan Kiberd to suggest that the "drive towards futurity is what marks the writings of Patrick Pearse" (65). There is something of this at work too in Róisín Ní Ghairbhí's claim that "Pearse [...] anticipated much of the thinking associated with pre-eminent postcolonial theorists of the second part of the twentieth century" (157) – a claim more usually reserved for James Connolly (e.g. Morris and Thompson). Each of the works examined below, finally, in some way prises open and creatively re-imagines those issues of authority and the law, located by Derrida as at stake in political transformation; each at some level addresses the problem of authority and the right to make/sign the law.

The first thing to be noted in this regard is that a large part of Pearse's creative work was published in Irish. In terms of his search for a new authorizing power at the heart of sovereignty, this fact takes on a meta-textual significance – Pearse's medium was in itself a rejection of the hegemonic "letter of the law", the "letter" he had sought to resist in his appearance in court as barrister for the Gaelic League. His most openly revolutionary play *The Singer*, indeed, includes moments that reflect on just this relationship between language and the law. MacDara, the play's poet-rebel hero, recalls his attempts to publish his revolutionary ballads: "I went to a bookseller and gave him the book of my songs to print. He said that he dared not print them; that the Gall would put him in prison and break up his printing-press" (29). Just as with the real-life case of Irish names on carts, colonial law is here presented as protecting itself from the challenge posed to its authority by a language, and thus ontology, which lies beyond it. The character of MacDara is in many ways Pearse's projection of his idealized self on stage, and *The Singer* is largely concerned with the links between language, action, and the necessity of challenging social and political norms. When asked by his old teacher (Maoilsheachlainn) "Is a poet not a maker?", for example, MacDara responds by saying that cultural creativity is merely the first step on the road to full revolution:

No, he is only a voice that cries out, a sigh that trembles into rest. The true teacher must suffer and do. He must break bread to the people: he must go into Gethsemane and toil up the steep of Golgotha. (29)

This central image is not quite the straightforward Christian piety it may first appear; rather, it allows Pearse to reference Christ as a proto-type of the radical revolutionary, a model of transformatory possibility. Once again, then, we see here the search for a language that can fully present the nation as a space that lies beyond the profane reality of imperial materialism; once again the search leads Pearse to an image of the people as sacred, as the keepers of an authenticity capable of challenging colonial hegemony:

The people, Maoilsheachlainn, the dumb, suffering people: reviled and outcast, yet pure and splendid and faithful. In them I saw, or seemed to see again, the Face of God. Ah, it is a tear-stained face, blood-stained, defiled with ordure, but it is the Holy Face. (*Singer* 34–35)

The divine conceit is more obviously politically loaded at this stage; the biblical imagery is a vehicle for a message of communal radicalization, and it is this that provides the actual context for MacDara's claim that "One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world". The image of divinity is really an image of counter-sovereignty, an alternative site of law; and this in turn is aligned to "the people" in a message of anti-colonial resistance. The usual claims that Pearse suffered from some form of messianic self-delusion must be tempered, then, by a reading more attuned to the subversive philosophical scaffolding that lies behind the seemingly reactionary religiosity.

The Singer, written in late 1915, was in many ways Pearse's dramatic pre-manifesto for the actual revolutionary theatre of the following year's Easter Rising. But its central theme – conflict between the people as a genuine site of power and an artificial sovereignty/law – is present in much of Pearse's work for the theatre during this period. *The Master* (1915) presents a confrontation between a noble teacher – named Ciaran but clearly another sublimated version of Pearse's self-image – and a King figure named Daire. The play returns its audience to one of the key turning-points in Irish history, the arrival of Christianity and the subsequent displacement of older druidic religious practices. Its message is once again the possibility of transformation and the importance of those who are willing to face down entrenched positions of power. Early in the piece three of Ciaran's pupils discuss the King's opposition to his teachings:

Art: But why does the King come against Ciaran?

Ceallach: It is the Druids that have incited him. They say that Ciaran is over-turning the ancient law of the people.

Maine: The King has ordered him to leave the country. (74)

Thereafter the play proceeds by way of a biblical analogue: the Old Testament of royal power is challenged by the New Testament of an enlightened law represented by the teacher and his community of pupils. As would have been obvious to most of the audience, the former stands in for colonial law while the latter presents a form of proto-republicanism. Tellingly, the play ends with a stage-image that leaves no doubt as to which of these forces is in the ascendancy. The Archangel Michael appears on stage – to protect Ciaran from the King's sword – proclaiming his arrival in terms that reinforce the alignment of republican action with a tactical rendering of the sacred as an alternative authorizing power:

Michael: I am he that waiteth at the portal. I am he that hasteneth. I am he that rideth before the squadron. I am he that holdeth a shield over the retreat of man's host when Satan cometh in war. I am he that turneth and smiteth. I am he that is Captain of the Host of God. (99)

Faced with this divine confirmation that the old order must give way to the new, the King bends to his knee in supplication. *The Master's* return to a moment when the "law of the people" was re-imagined and radically translated away from the pagan towards the Christian provides an analogue for counter-hegemonic resistance. The costumes may be archaic but the message is extraordinarily modern.

There is a similar dynamic to be found in the earliest of this dramatic trilogy, *The King* (1913). As with *The Master*, this play is again set in a place of learning – "an ancient monastery" – and centres on the transfer of power away from a misguided sovereign. The eponymous King in this case is a despotic ruler who has suffered a number of recent reversals in battle; as the play opens, from their viewpoint in the monastery, two of its inhabitants discuss the reasons for this run of bad fortune:

First Monk: Tell us, Father, the cause of these unnumbered defeats.

The Abbot: Do you think that an offering will be accepted from polluted hands? This King has shed the blood of the innocent. He has made spoils and forays. He has oppressed the poor. He has forsaken the friendship of God and made friends with evil-doers. (Pearse, *King* 52)

Unable to openly provide such a blunt critique of colonial practices in a Dublin theatre in 1913 (*The King* was produced at the Abbey Theatre that May), Pearse sublimates his vision of British wrongdoing into this tyrannical figure and his abuse of sovereign power. The Abbot, moreover, suggests that such a rotten core at the centre of the law should not be in a position to decide on the issues of life and death at stake in moments of crisis:

The Abbot: It is an angel that should be sent to pour out the wine and to break the bread of this sacrifice. Not by an unholy King should the noble wine that is in the veins of good heroes be spilt; not at the behest of a guilty king should fair bodies be mangled. I say to you that the offering will not be accepted. (52)

The King thereafter becomes about the search for one who could more ably interpret the proper responsibilities of sovereignty as the origin of the law, and thus as the keeper of a power over the bodies in its care. It is here, too, that the play takes its most obvious republican turn, with the suggestion that the real problem is the site of power in royal prerogative – a site that increasingly stands in Pearse’s work as a synecdoche for the functioning of British colonialism in Ireland:

The Abbot: The nation is guilty of the sins of its princes. I say to you that this nation shall not be freed until it chooses for itself a righteous King.

Second Monk: Where shall a righteous King be found?

The Abbot: I do not know, unless he be found among these little boys. (52–53)

And this, of course, is exactly where he is found, in the perfect Pearsian figure of Irish independence and the people – the young schoolboy. While the monks have been busy with their analysis of politics and power, the young boys of the monastery have likewise been discussing their own position in the hierarchy of the imagined nation. Most of them are boastful of the fact that they come from the royal line and are thus worthy candidates to take over as King. But one, named Giolla na Naomh (servant of the saints), refuses to propose himself as a successor to the King, declaring instead: “I would rather be a monk that I might pray for the King” (50). It is this righteous boy who takes the King’s place in battle; the symbolic alteration in sovereignty changes the course of the conflict and the people are victorious – winning their fight for freedom after seeing the young boy fall and die in battle for them. Importantly the old King gives way willingly and kneels before the dead boy’s fallen body, thus acknowledging this symbolic representative of a previously abused people as the rightful site of power. Once again Pearse invites his audience to witness a moment of transference and transformation; the question of sovereignty is presented as mutable and translatable, a crucially enabling conclusion in Pearse’s project to rearticulate colonial law and its enactment in Ireland.

By way of concluding I want to turn briefly to one of Pearse’s most interesting and subversive short-stories – “The Keening Woman”/“*An Bhean Chaointe*” (originally published in two parts, 1907/1916). This is a story that demonstrates most clearly the possibility of reading Pearse as a proto-modernist. Indeed, Pearse’s story reads like an anti-colonial version of Franz Kafka’s later story “Before the Law” (1914). In Kafka’s story a man from the country (he is Everyman) seeks admittance to the law; but a doorkeeper

continually delays this admittance, telling him “not yet”, and requires the man to sit waiting at the door. The man waits all his life until finally the moment of his death arrives, and this same doorkeeper tells him that now he is closing the door – which has remained open throughout this lifetime of waiting. The man, it turns out, has been in the grasp of the law all along, precisely through his position of waiting for admission to it – there is no place into which the man can enter, for as Derrida puts it in his reading of the story, the law here is “the guarding itself, only the guarding” (“Before” 206). According to Derrida, Kafka reveals the real heart and origin of the law: “The secret is nothing – and this is the secret that has to be kept well, nothing either present or presentable, but this nothing must be well kept. To this task of keeping, the nobility is delegated” (205). The law for Derrida, in other words, is present only in, and by way of, its happening – and this “secret” is kept by the authors of hegemonic power. While not suggesting Pearse was engaged with the kind of linguistic turn produced by post-structuralism, I do want to pick up on some resonances between his work and the reading of the law proposed by Derrida. As we have seen, Patrick Pearse’s work is populated with figures of tyrannical sovereignty, ciphers of British colonialism, all of whom seem charged mainly with the task of disguising their own inadequacy. For Pearse this is the enactment of an anti-colonial resistance strategy, but it is of note nonetheless that his stock of political imagery so often taps into a reading of (colonial) law as an empty signifier.

Like Kafka’s “Before the Law”, then, “The Keening Woman” also tells the story of waiting. We meet an old woman who has spent the last decades of her life waiting for the return of her son Coilin from prison. In the course of the story we discover that her son died many years ago in prison and that she has since gone mad; it is also suggested that Coilin was innocent of the murder for which he was imprisoned – the murder of a local landowner was actually carried out by a government agent. The story is clearly indebted to Lady Gregory’s *The Gaol Gate*, and at its centre stands a journey undertaken by the mother who moves through a series of authority figures in search of justice for her son. As she tells us:

I went to Galway. I saw the Governor of the gaol. He told me that he wouldn’t be able to do a taste, that it’s the Dublin people who would be able to let him out of gaol, if his letting-out was to be got. (“Keening Woman” 219)

While Kafka’s man from the country gets to meet only one doorkeeper, Pearse’s mother figure moves through a series of doors but each is revealed as unable to deliver the law. On finally reaching Dublin she tells us:

The morning of the next day I enquired for the Castle. I was put on the way. I went there. They wouldn’t let me in at first, but I was at them till I got leave of talk with some man. He put me on to another man, a man that was higher than himself. He sent me to another man. I said to them all I wanted was to see the Lord Lieutenant of the Queen. I saw him at last. I told him my story. He said to me that he couldn’t do anything. I gave my curse to the Castle of Dublin, and out the door with me. (220)

Once again the law appears here as that which guards itself, as that which continually delays those that seek it; Pearse’s story works to reveal colonial law as an absence that protects itself by a process of constant deferral. The story reaches its conclusion with the rather unlikely notion of the woman travelling to London to see the Queen; it is a move that allows Pearse to place “Ireland” in direct confrontation with the putative sovereign origin of colonial law in Ireland:

When I came to London I asked knowledge of the Queen's Castle. I was told. I went there. They wouldn't let me in. I went there every day, hoping that I'd see the Queen coming out. [...] I went over to the Queen before she went in to her coach. There was a paper, a man in Dublin wrote for me, in my hand. [...] I spoke to the Queen. She didn't understand me. I stretched the paper to her. She gave the paper to the officer, and he read it. He wrote certain words on the paper, and gave it back to me. The Queen spoke to another woman that was along with her. The woman drew out a crown piece and gave it to me. I gave her back the crown piece, and I said that it's not silver I wanted, but my son. They laughed. It's my opinion they didn't understand me. I showed them the paper again. The officer laid his finger on the words he was after writing. I curtsied to the Queen and went off with me. A man read for me the words the officer wrote. It's what was in it, that they would write to me about Coilin without delay. I struck the road home then, hoping that, maybe, there would be a letter before me. (221)

The letter, of course, never arrives and the woman is left to wait before the law in a narrative that can offer her no resolution; the impossibility of communication condemns her to the state of trauma-induced psychosis in which we meet her at the story's outset. Importantly, however, Pearse's narrative does index a resolution for the reader; or at least the story's purpose seems to be to suggest for the reader possible starting points for resolution. The woman, of course, is "mother-Ireland" and her textual journey from coast to coast in Ireland, and from Ireland to England and back again, has primarily established the need to look to herself for a law that can properly read her, and which she can in turn read – to reclaim, in other words, the authority to sign the law. Finally, then, returning us to the seemingly minor case of the Irish letters on carts, the story's central anti-colonial image is of a fundamental failure in communication between imperial sovereignty and Ireland: the always arriving, but forever delayed, "letter of the law" is here proposed as a simulacrum of true law. Like the trilogy of plays that will come after it, the story's analytical capacity reveals a proto-modernist sensibility. Taken together, these works also map out the imaginative territory on which Pearse the revolutionary would later stake his claim to sign the authority to sign the law.

Notes on contributor

Eugene McNulty lectures in English at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra (Dublin City University), and his main research interests focus on 19th- and 20th-century Irish literature and culture. He is the author of *The Ulster Literary Theatre and the Northern Revival* (Cork UP, 2008), as well as articles in journals such as *The Irish Review* and *Irish University Review*. His current research concerns the conceptualization of the law in Irish theatre.

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